

# **The Flyers: A Symbolology Of Hope**

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## **Abstract**

Hope acts as a source of inspiration for many artists, however it is difficult to define due to its abstract nature. To better understand the essence of hope and how this concept relates to the process of painting and drawing, my research examines the symbolism of flight for its correlation to hope. Flight, like hope, relates to the transportation of self. This physical movement of flight from one place to the next exemplifies the emotional movement of hope. Additionally, flight requires a specific biological design much in the way that hope requires a faith grounded in doctrine. To engage flight, first; the structure has to be agreeable to flying, such as the hollow lightness of bird wings or the particulars of maple seeds. Second, one must wait for a particular set of conditions, such as the catching of wind observed in birds in flight or the aerodynamically designed maple seed. Maple seeds are constructed to oppose gravity by way of a leading-edge vortex. This waiting acts as a liminal space that can be difficult yet transformative. Alterations to self begin to take place by way of partnership with a larger force such as the wind contributing to flight, or how one's faith devotes hope. Both are rooted in order but allow for freedom. My research about hope and flight is directly connected to my approach to painting through my artistic process, which is built on a balance of compositional structure in drawing and the magnitude of possibilities found in instinctive brush strokes. In my recent exhibition *The Flyers: A Symbolology Of Hope*, I developed my paintings by rendering the subjects such as birds and maple seeds in a representational manner and then immersing them in a non-representational atmosphere free of restraint. This allows me the freedom to explore the canvas with color and form while also being grounded in technique and purpose.

## **1. Introduction**

Through the use of symbols an artist constructs a personal language to communicate with their viewers. The worlds they create have a rhythm and flow that is unique to their specific hand and voice. Creatives often turn to symbols drawn from nature in that they are integral to language and speech, and are used as a way to command attention and evoke emotion. One such symbol is that of flight, which has been used to represent the conceptualization of hope. Artists use flight to show movement related to a future potential. The dynamics of flight have similarity to the abstract concept of hope in that both produce a shift in perspective and require trust to obtain. Hope is a way of altering the angle of expectations in an optimistic way, while flight is the physical transportation of body. Eluding gravity can incite imagination and the possibility of something greater to hope for, thus inspiring research from scientists as well as artists. This motivates the incorporation of constructs of hope into the language of art by various symbolic representations, such as flight.

## **2. Flight**

Soaring birds have the ability to ascend high into the sky with little exertion. They can rise a hundred yards without a single beat of the wing.<sup>1</sup> Understanding the physicality of flight is important when extracting its essence. How is it

that birds are able to fly? What sustains their bodies in the air? Bird skeletons need to be lightweight and strong to withstand the metabolic cost of flight and the environmental forces a bird encounters.<sup>2</sup> However, even though bird bones appear delicate, they are supported by a skeletal system that is dense relative to total body and soft tissue mass.<sup>3</sup>

Birds are just one example of flight in nature. Another subdivision of flight is that of the hovering maple seed. Research from Wageningen University in the Netherlands and the California Institute of Technology published a study in the journal of *Science* revealing the secret behind the flight of twirling maple seeds. Maple seeds have been a fascination for children and like minded adults for generations. As the seeds fall to the ground they create a spinning motion similar to that of a helicopter propeller, thus earning their common name “Helicopters”. Figures 1 and 2 exhibit two paintings that study the descension of a maple seed..



Figure 1. Jodi O'Hara, *Embers*. 2019  
Oil, Copper leaf on canvas. 24x 48"



Figure 2. *Emanate*. 2018  
Oil, Copper leaf on canvas. 12"x24"

The pirouette-like motion of the seed creates an aerodynamic vortex that slows the descension and allows the seed to travel. This vortex is called a Leading-Edge Vortex- as the seed swirls, air pressure is lowered over the “upper surface of the maple seed, effectively sucking the wing upward to oppose gravity, giving it a boost. The vortex doubles the lift generated by the seeds compared to non swirling seeds.”<sup>4</sup> The Leading-Edge vortex allows the seed a sort of thrust. Essentially, this seed has been designed to succeed, it is full of potential. This same lift or hovering motion found within the “helicopter” is also used by certain insects, bats, and hummingbirds. It is intriguing how the mechanical reciprocity of flight is found throughout nature.<sup>5</sup> Louis Pierre Mouillard, the author of “*The Empire of The Air*” describes how humans can learn from nature to uncover its great mysteries, He states, “By merely observing with close attention to how the winged tribes perform their feats, by carefully reflecting upon what we have seen, and above all, by striving correctly to understand the *modus operandi* of what we do see, we are sure not to wander far from the path, which leads to eventual success.”<sup>6</sup> Flight requires particular biological components that are accompanied by the unpredictable force of wind. Humans draw inspiration from nature, furthering the quest of emulating flight through scientific means while also pulling from the deep well of flight symbolism.

### 3. Hope

To possess hope, an inner dialog of humility, courage, and patience is necessary. This unseen narrative is a journey that shifts attitudes and alters outcomes. Hope is related to happiness but goes beyond ideals of a perfect utopian conclusion. Gabriel Marcel, one of the most influential philosophers of hope in the twentieth century believed that there are two states of hope: limited and absolute. Limited hope revolves around earthly desires while absolute hope is centered in mystery and is regarded as a virtue.<sup>7</sup> He describes the human as a traveller or wayfarer on a journey traversing life's difficulties, and believes hope to be the key to perseverance. He states "There can strictly speaking be no hope except when the temptation to despair exists. Hope is the act by which this temptation is actively or victoriously overcome."<sup>8</sup> It exists despite the difficulties of life, and is the thing that propels one further. It is not just an idea but rather an experience of emotional movement, as one must move or shift their perspective to attain it. There is an open ended nature to absolute hope that goes beyond imagination and dwells in the mystery of the unseen future. This is because absolute hope pertains to trust and dwells in the discipline of one's doctrine. Darren Webb, author of *Christian Hope and the Politics of Utopia* explains "Individuals are confronted with a choice: one either welcomes or rejects the gift of hope. To welcome and embrace this gift is to orient oneself toward the world in a spirit of humble, courageous, trusting patience... hope is not to transform the world itself (either imaginatively or materially) but is rather to transform one's 'inner attitude' toward it." Acquiring hope is to align oneself with a wielding creative power which exists in yourself.<sup>9</sup> Because hope is the rearrangement of viewpoint it lends itself well to the metaphor of flight. Figure 3 demonstrates the significance of this viewpoint. Notice how the subject gazes into the distance suggesting an approaching future that is pleasing.



Figure 3. Jodi O'Hara, *The Build Up*. Oil on canvas. 2018. 36"x 36"

### 4. Symbology

Symbolism in nature expands one's understanding of language. Symbols are used by humans as a way to communicate hopes, fears, and thoughts. Stephen Kellert, author of *Birthing People and Nature in the Modern World*, explains the relationships between humans and symbols: "The human capacity for creating symbols relies heavily on our relationship to the natural world. Whenever we deal with the real in nature, we almost always simultaneously create a symbolic image and representation of it. We transform actual objects into their imagined form, shifting from the

empirical to a more vicarious reality.”<sup>10</sup> Kellert stresses that humans have a natural inclination to link symbols to lived experiences. Symbols derived from nature show up in alogories, our fables, and our fantasies.<sup>11</sup> The use of these motifs convey meaning and reveal hidden truths. Artists often use animals as emblems to suggest certain qualities and attributes associated with the perceived demeanor of the animal. For example: an author might use the analogies “wise as an owl; clever as a fox; busy as a beaver; brave as a lion...” or take a less obvious path with “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?”<sup>12</sup> Writers and visual artists use symbols to communicate a desired emotion.

Emotion is an incredibly important aspect to address in art; it is a non-mechanized out-pouring. Toward the end of the nineteenth century in Europe, artists developed new language embedded with symbolism that was rich in feeling. The Symbolists at the time were experiencing significant cultural shifts such as industrialization and the reformation of the Catholic Church. Because the Enlightenment period fostered what could be considered a testimonial obligation to science and modernity, a struggle amidst spirituality and science occurred. The launch of Realism in the arts was birthed.<sup>13</sup> Realist painters were heavily influenced by the progression of science, and sought to achieve accuracy within their subjects. This is in contrast to the Symbolist artist who felt that art making encompassed more than a precise rendering. They challenged the scope of creation. These Symbolist painters acknowledged more than one plane of reality, an unknown reality. Michael Gibson, art historian and author of *Symbolism* describes the essence of what the Symbolists of that time were attempting to awaken: “A symbol, by its very nature, refers to an absent reality. In mathematics it signifies an unknown quantity; in religion, poetry or art, it lends substance to an unknown quality...”<sup>14</sup> Because this realm is not seen but felt, it signifies the sacred. See figure 4 to observe the symbolism of crows. Notice how the woman is being surrounded by the crows; she remains calm and serene despite their powerful and dominating presence. Crows are largely misunderstood as they are scavengers yet highly intelligent. This juxtaposition presents a frame of reference symbolizing wisdom and their personification as burden bearers.



Figure 4. Jodi O'Hara, *Strength In Her Quiet*. Oil on canvas. 2019. 24"x36"

This sacredness heavily influenced the work of Morris Graves, an American painter who lived from 1910-2001. He was enamored with painting birds. Michael Cohen, author of *The Bird Paintings of Morris Graves* states, “Morris Graves is haunted by an inner compulsion to paint birds. But, for Graves, a bird is more than an anatomical entity of feathers and frail bones; indeed his birds are often symbols of an inner life, corresponding in some way to the artist’s hidden, reticent and mobile personality.”<sup>15</sup> Graves believed that birds stood symbolically for an inner realm, or rather, the spirit that he referred to as the “inner eye”.<sup>16</sup> Graves’s birds were “related to a quiet, inner, psychological realm...”<sup>17</sup> He used birds to represent the complex layers of lived experience- that of hope and the internal conversations existing within the spirit. Notice in figure 2 how the bird is interacting with the background, a push and pull of space and dimensions.





Figure 5. Graves, *Bird in the Spirit*, 1943. Gouache on paper  
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/488612>

Graves explains the symbolism behind the birds used in his work: “a language with which to remark upon the qualities of our mysterious capacities which direct us toward ultimate reality.”<sup>18</sup> Symbols used in art allow for the consideration of multiple vantage points, proportionately similar to a vantage point flight provides.

Symbols often overlap across art forms. For example, the visual language that Morris Graves amassed is similar to the written language of the poets Emily Dickinson and J.M. Barrie. Writers convey ideas and evoke emotion by the arrangement of words. Metaphors act as a strong instrument in the written language to approach thoughts. The concept of flight as a symbol for hope has been established by Dickinson and J.M. Barrie. In Dickinson’s poem “Hope is the thing with feathers” published in 1891, hope is clearly described as a bird, something that takes to the sky. Dickinson expresses:

“Hope” is the thing with feathers -  
 That perches in the soul -  
 And sings the tune without the words -  
 And never stops - at all -

And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -  
 And sore must be the storm -  
 That could abash the little Bird  
 That kept so many warm -<sup>19</sup>

She illustrates hope as a bird that exists within one’s soul. Hope traverses the storms of life in quiet humility. Another literary example joining the concept of flight and hope is found in the 1904 children’s story *The Little White Bird* written by J.M. Barrie. In this story the audience is first introduced to the beloved fictional character Peter Pan. Barrie adds “...the moment you doubt whether you can fly, you cease forever to be able to do it. The reason birds can fly and we can’t is simply that they have perfect faith, for to have faith is to have wings.” Barrie concludes that doubt is the destruction of hope. And in order to fly one must let faith take root within. He binds the picture of hope with one’s

faith for something to come to fruition. This is a striking image paired with flight. Imagine the mamma bird who edges her young out on a tree limb trusting in her chicks natural ability to fly. There is a bedrock of faith that is needed to ensure they will indeed succeed. Dickinson and Barrie's use of flight as a symbol for hope opens doors for other art forms to follow suit. Hope draws from an inherent desire for future good. Although difficult to pinpoint the origin of hope, it is related to freedom which is why artists establish the connection of hope to flight.

## 5. Inspirational artists

Anselm Kiefer is a contemporary artist who uses the theme of heaven and earth to present his views on transcendence and to express an overall belief in hope beyond a wounded world. Kiefer does this with his use of a limited color palette of greys, browns, and blacks as well as choice symbolism, mostly desolate landscapes, and unconventional materials such as lead, steel, ash, tar, straw, etc... Kiefer's choice of materials take on transcendent properties that go beyond their substance. However it is Kiefer's own words that best describe his choices. When conveying his landscapes he states:

"Ploughing and burning, like slash and burn agriculture, is a process of regeneration, so that the earth can be reborn and create new growth toward the sun... That is what creates a state where hope is possible. If there is no metamorphosis, we have nothing to hope for after death. Spiritual understanding of the idea of metamorphosis makes it easier to die. That is what the figure is thinking about in some of my paintings. Sometimes you see the firmament all around him, sometimes flowers- for example, the sunflowers growing near him, or even in his belly. There is this primitive idea of incarnation in the ground leading to transformation. The other aspect is the transformation of humus, a transformation analogous to that of flowering plants. This is the most triumphant but also the saddest moment; after that they die and the flower becomes an urn for the seeds"<sup>20</sup>

Kiefer's barren landscapes are actually symbols of hope. It is from a place of sorrow that the power of hope is harnessed. In the documentary titled *Over Your Cities Grass Will Grow*, which examines Kiefer's work and process, he was asked about the light which is found in his images. He responded with "...more like switching off the light, fading it out... allowed only in small places."<sup>21</sup> He likens them to celestial palaces that are not only above but also below. Kiefer doesn't paint the light, he paints the shadows, the light is just a by-product. This is a bold statement that reflects the nature of hope and how it originates from despair. The process of hoping is fluid and fosters mystery and meaning that can not be conveyed from ordinary language. Figure 5. demonstrates the vast landscapes often seen in Kiefer's work. Although the deteriorating landscape can appear bleak, hope is offered within the hovering substance which appears to have lifted from the debris like a cloud. The centrally located window acts as a gateway into the future.



Figure 6. Anselm Kiefer , Aschenblume, 2004, Oil, acrylic, emulsion on canvas, dimensions 243 x 281.5 cm

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[artstororg.proxy177.nclive.org/#/asset/ARTSTOR\\_103\\_41822003837364;prevRouteTS=1573422475870](https://library-artstororg.proxy177.nclive.org/#/asset/ARTSTOR_103_41822003837364;prevRouteTS=1573422475870)

Per Kirkeby is another artist that creates from a place of reclamation. He commits himself to weidling the uncontrolled by starting with risk and forming it into a structure. He stated that “...one builds on ruins. And something even better is created”.<sup>22</sup> Control emerges from the chaos. This system of risk and dependability creates a struggle with beauty that is so often found in our own lives. harnessing a harmony through tension. This same tension is what artists Jodi O’Hara explores in her body of work *The Flyers: A Symbolology Of Hope*.

## 6. Process and Methodology

In a recent exhibition titled *The Flyers: A Symbolology Of Hope*, artist Jodi O’Hara exhibited a series of paintings investigating the abstract concept of hope. All of the images for this series involve the symbolism of flight in relation to hope, because flight portrays physical movement and new vantage points. Hope pertains to a future good and a desire for an alternate outcome. However, the most distressing aspect surrounding the presence of hope is that it does not exist without the company of pain. Its existence is an outgrowth from sorrow. However, the great news is that the nature of hope is a magnificently creative force that does not rely on having direct answers to problems, but instead acts as momentum for solutions to transpire. Similarly, O’Hara’s process for creating involves a balance of planning and a large amount of trust in the unknown.

The artist purposely leaves room in her paintings for spontaneity because she finds that not planning the image in its entirety creates both difficulties but also triumphs as she figures out solutions to compositions. Most of the images revolve around what she refers to as an anchor- it is the thing that gives the painting weight and direction. These are the representational components found within the work. This anchor is drawn on the canvas prior to painting and is intentional in subject and placement. Having this facet in place allows the artist the freedom to explore the rest of the canvas freely through color and form, and exists as an atmosphere for interpretation by the viewer. O’Hara builds up many layers of oil paint to indicate history and to reveal a conversation about past experiences, encouraging the audience to draw from their own understanding. There is an aspect of ambiguity to O’Hara’s work that mirrors that of



hope. Figure 6 explores sorrow and the difficulty in waiting on the solutions to problems. When one is immersed in darkness they can not see, trust in the process is required. Notice how the crows (a symbol of wisdom) must traverse this darkness to overcome it.



Figure 7. Jodi O'Hara, *The Waiting For Sun*. Oil on canvas. 2019. 3 Panels  
Each panel is 1 ½' x 7'

## 7. Conclusion

Absolute hope remains a mysterious force, an invitation to share in a journey with a powerful momentum that moves the self into a new frame of reference. The artist that draws inspiration from such an energy embarks upon the challenge of giving a visual representation to an invisible dynamism. The most accessible way to do this is to depict hope with a symbol, giving it weight, which guides the viewer into a perceptive response. This weight is a welcoming compass for the viewer to navigate the emotional movement of hope. Birds in flight and maple seeds take on metaphorical scope as an invitation of introspection to view oneself and the world. The tension between the realized and ambiguous elements require a reflective contemplation from the viewer. Hope, an unseen transformative force, is strangely grounded in the discipline of one's doctrine much in the same way O'Hara's art is expressive yet anchored in technique and purpose. Due to the unexpected juxtaposition of structure and freedom, seemingly simple elements of shape, line, and color create an energy that has the potential to speak to the viewer in ways unknown to even the artist.



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